

Sakshi Gupta: "when time from time shall set us free"

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Sakshi Gupta bursts upon the art horizon with an exhibition of extraordinary power, creating a language that seems to have little precedence. Her debut solo show, titled "If the Seas Catch Fire" after a poem by ee cummings, recently opened at Experimenter, Colaba, as part of the Mumbai Art Week 2023, bringing her work to the public gaze after a hiatus of four years.

Gupta's chosen material is used iron, sourced from scrapyards. Extracted and smelted at high heat, and shaped into girders, beams, frames and vessels in vast incinerators, this detritus defies obsolescence and is revived into life forms in her hands. Bearing the patina of age, wind and water, Gupta's works bear no resemblance to the material's originary use and associations of industry, nor does she ally with any existing kinds of art practice. What we receive is the object as a living contemplation of temporality. Iron waste is refined and woven into works of delicacy, potent and heavy with meaning. The artworks – exhausted palm fronds, an aviary in bristling metal, a carpet bearing the history of intense wear and tear – may share little conceptual relationship other than their tentative locus of being poised between life and death, existence and disintegration. Yet, set immutably in iron, their state of decay is petrified, with each form serving as a subjective measure of time.

The signal work in the exhibition is a large metal cabinet, made of shallow compartments, in which birds, small and large, appear to be stuffed and folded together with shocking realism. Chicks, sparrows, ducks, egrets, pigeons and large-tailed peacocks, crammed together behind metal strips, nevertheless seem to spill irrepressibly outside the constricting frames. In this cabinet of claustrophobic spillages, Gupta creates a macabre, gut-wrenching view: we may think of the birds as the fallout of an ecological disaster or avian flu, or trapped in the cruel confines of a testing laboratory. If the cumulative reading is of the devastating imprint of the Anthropocene, Gupta's own interpretation rests with the mind, the wrestle and flow of thoughts, acts of denial and suppression. In conversation, she speaks of the human body as constituted of seventy per cent water, set like a sea on fire, as suggested by the exhibition title.

In the last decade of tepid art and institutional control, nothing of such ability and invention has been seen that redefines the language of sculpture. That Gupta is able to visualize in clunky iron rods and sheets – harvested from old ships condemned to demolition – the delicacy of limp and fallen palm fronds, or a carpet moth-eaten with age, speaks for her uncanny understanding of material. Each striation is separated like a metal skein and then adhered to the next, seemingly effortlessly. Tiny scales are layered, like a residue of age; wires in clusters are made to resemble tufts of wool in the frayed carpet. The making of each piece is artful, and born of a process of long observation. For instance, every tear and fold in the carpet is seemingly tied to a natural process of use and decay, and in the contours of the palm fronds, the act of withering and decay becomes abundant with meaning. In some spaces, there is the detritus of the city of Bombay, constantly in a state of (dis)repair, its sidewalks crowded with abandoned parts of broken pavements, to which Gupta confers iron plant forms as vestiges of life.

At the core of Gupta's conception lie the highly masculinist processes of welding, beating, smelting and perforating, which create works of such fragile intent. What would be the psychological equivalences of such an invocation of temporality? The bodies of the birds are still plump with life; the beaks of the chicks seem to open in a cacophony of sounds, their feathers erect, as if half-readied for flight. Viewing these works, one is drawn into the phenomenology of the passage of time, almost petrified into permanence in an afterlife of iron waste, the tension between death and life invoking a visceral response. Can we imagine a kind of syncope, of being caught just before the moment of death?

Or is the making itself an act of retrieval, of the arresting of form in the hardest of materials, to ensure an afterlife?

Almost an an epilogue, Gupta draws you into the last room of the show, where in a heaped pile lie cast ceramic objects. There is a dramatic shift of materials here, in the newest body of work. Still engaging with monochrome, she choses the smooth surfaces of ceramic to invoke the abandoned waste of Bombay, a city always being made and remade. Be it in her simulation of bags of cement or lumpy piles of construction waste, the city seems to render its own detritus, as well as yield its own inspirations for their refashioning. The circle of making and breaking, of hope and abjection, continues.

(The quote in the review's title is from ee cummings.)

If the Seas Catch Fire is on view at Experimentier, Colaba, from September 14 to October 26.